

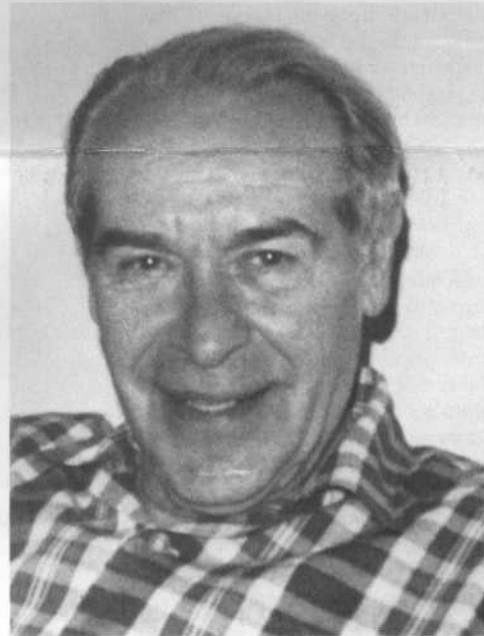
LIBERTY AND SELF-CONTROL: GOETHE'S VISION OF A NEW WORLD

By Oskar Seidlin

Dr. Oskar Seidlin, Professor Emeritus at Indiana University, is well known in Germanistic circles throughout the world. He has published numerous books, articles, essays and critical reviews both in German and in English. He was born in Konigshutte in Upper Silesia (Poland) and studied German literature, history and philosophy at the universities in Freiburg, Frankfurt, Berlin, Basel, and Lausanne. He received his doctorate from the University of Basel. Since coming to the United States in 1938 he has taught at Smith College, Ohio State University, and Indiana University. He has served as co-editor of the German Quarterly and Arcadia and was on the editorial advisory board of several other periodicals.

Long a dedicated friend of Hillsdale College, Dr. Seidlin visited the Center for Constructive Alternatives at Hillsdale in March 1982 to deliver this lecture commemorating the 150th anniversary of the death of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. We publish it as an example of the interest CCA takes in humane studies as well as in public affairs; a reminder of the chord America has struck with leading thinkers around the world since its birth; and a statement of educational philosophy closely akin to that practiced here at Hillsdale.

When we are in danger of losing ourselves in the vast and limitless panorama which Goethe's life and work present to the viewer, a clearly defined, concrete picture should provide a focus to our eyes. Let us then fasten our eyes to a small radius of visibility: the tiny room upstairs in the manorial house on the Frauenplan in Weimar, furnished with a plain desk and a few simple bookcases, a monk's cell rather than the study of a writer whom much of Europe reveres as the uncrowned ruler over the realm of the spirit. At this desk he is at work now, a very old man, over eighty years of age,



holding himself quite erect; under a thin crown of white hair and a majestically high forehead are a pair of dark eyes whose clarity, firmness, and power have struck so many of his visitors as supranatural.

He knows that death already awaits him at the threshold, that he has traversed almost to the end of life richer than that of many another mortal in experiences and in productive responses to these experiences. But he has yet to finish his greatest work, the dramatic poem of *Faust*, which has accompanied him through all his life. For he was an impetuous youngster of hardly more than twenty when the image of Faust first appeared before his mind; and now, sixty years later, he still lies chained to this poem of his. Faust has traveled with him through all the avenues of life, has partaken of his experiences: the passionate search for truth, the bliss of love, the agonies of suffering, error and sin, fulfillment and failure, loud worldly splendor

im•pri•mis (im-pri-mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin in primis, among the first (things)....

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and the serene devotion to beauty. For sixty years this creation of his has been at his side; and now the moment has come when, in the great poem, Faust's final hour has struck. And while the wingbeat of death already touches his own shoulder, Goethe, the old man in his eighties, takes leave of Faust, the old man of 100. Yet before the poet lowers the last curtain over Faust's earthly existence, he grants this child of his imagination a last vision. Once more Faust sees, no longer with his physical eyes whose light old age and worry have extinguished; but before his inner eye a sight opens which transforms the moment of his death into the moment of highest triumph:

A marsh extends along the mountain chain
That poisons what so far I've been achieving:
Could I that noisome pool now drain,
'Twould be the highest, last achieving.
Thus space to many millions I will give
Where, though not safe, yet free and active they may live.
Green fertile fields where straightway from their birth
Both men and beast live happy on the newest earth,
Settled forthwith along the mighty hill
Raised by a daring, busy people's will.
Within: a land like paradise, outside:
Up to the brink may rage the mighty tide,
And where it gnaws and would burst through and sap
A common impulse hastes to close the gap.
Yes, to this thought I hold unswerving,
To wisdom's final fruit, profoundly true:
Of freedom and of life he only is deserving
Who every day must conquer them anew.
That there, by danger girt, the active day
Of childhood, manhood, age will pass away.
Aye, such a throng I fain would see,
Stand on free soil, among a people free.
Then I might say, that moment seeing:
Oh linger on, thou art so fair!
The traces of my earthly being,
Can perish not in aeons—they are there.
That lofty moment I now feel in this:
I now enjoy the highest moment's bliss.

A new world, Faust's last vision, Goethe's last vision: not a peacefully sweet Utopia, but a world fought for, a world to be defended every day, soil won from the bottomless, destructive element, the water; not ready-made land into which we just have to move, but earth created by our own hands, made fertile by the rhythm of our work and life. Free people on free soil: free not by virtue of brief and seal, but free because this land is created out of the nothingness, and because these people are creating it.

We need not strain our eyes too much in order to recognize the rough outlines of Faust's envisaged new world, in order to give it an at least approximately correct name: a frontier and frontiersmen, land to be wrung from the hold of the unknown and dangerous, bulwarks built by the communal efforts of a new nation—who, and who in this country, could fail to call these people on free soil by their proper name? Indeed, ever since the beginning of the nineteenth century, Goethe was fascinated by the experiment whose name

was America. There is warmth in his voice whenever he speaks of America, a cordial and paternal "good luck to you," a joyful feeling as if these far-away people who may never have heard of him, were his true children, going the way he wanted the new generation to go:

America, you're better off
Than our continent, the old.
You have no castles which are fallen,
No basalt to behold.
You are not disturbed in your inmost being,
In the very pulsation of life
By useless remembering
And unrewarding strife.
Use well the present—and good luck to you!
And when your children begin writing poetry,
Let them guard well, in all they do,
Against knight-, robber-, and ghost-story.

If we listen closely enough to this little congratulatory poem, we may be inclined to think that it contains a slightly left-handed compliment. For what he finds so enviable and fortunate about this new country is not that it has things others don't have, but that it does not have things others, unfortunately, have. America has no memories, no spectres rising out of the twilight zone of the human heart and human history, no ghosts which haunt the living and make their hands tremble. Geologist that he is, he even believes (and we know that he was quite wrong in that) that the very earth upon which this new nation has grown holds no memories of violent volcanic outbursts by which old and hidden formations of the soil are vehemently thrown onto the surface, that the basalt, witness of such explosions, is lacking in the make-up of this "newest earth." The hour that strikes over this country is always morning, its illumination the light of early day. Newly opened spaces where expansive and active motion is still possible, newly born time not yet overshadowed by the broodings and memories of yester-years—this is the bright vision for which Goethe found the name: America.

That things were in permanent flux, always beginning anew, and every end only the starting point for more and richer life—that was his profoundest conviction, and it was, the older he grew, the source of all his happiness. *Stirb und werde*, (Die and grow!)—this is the formula by which he expressed the secret of his own life, by which he tried to express the secret of life itself. And it was the very principle of stagnation which he embodied in the character of his devil Mephistopheles, the "bastard, half hellfire and half dung," who raises his cold fist against the eternally creative power. Goethe may, at times, have been annoyed when the young generation turned against him, the great colossus, who, in the eyes of some, stood in the way of new principles and new forms of life. Yet again and again he acknowledged the right of those who traveled on roads alien to him, because they were the roads of a new era:

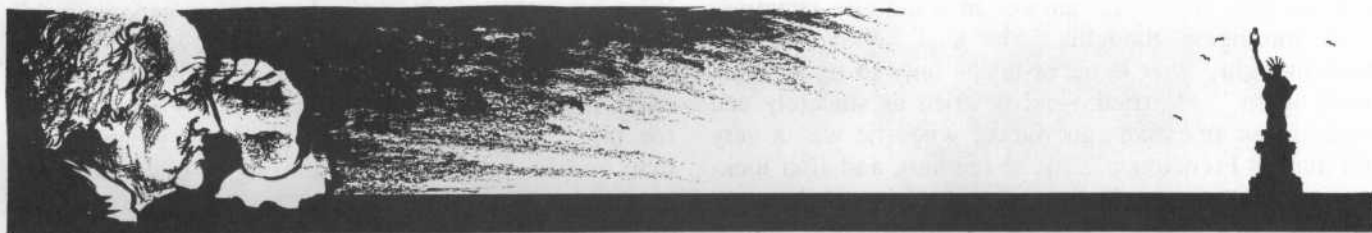
An aged man is always like King Lear.
 Who shared your doings, hand in hand,
 Long since went down the highway;
 Who loved and grieved at your command
 Is courting in another byway.
 Just for its own sake youth is with us here;
 It would be folly to demand:
 Come, grow a little old with me, my dear.

Indeed, it would be folly—and worse. It would be an attempt to interfere with the organic rhythm of birth, growth, decay, and re-birth which he not only worshipped in nature but which he observed and enjoyed in every single individual, in all manifestations of man's activities. It would be the most objectionable violation of what he recognized as man's highest duty. "And what is your duty?" he asks; and he answers himself: "The demand of the day!" The demand of the day, the challenge of the hour! When he was thinking of a new world, he thought of a humanity which listened obediently to what every hour expected of them and

the vagueness of infinite possibilities to the one finite and distinguishable phenomenon. Work, then, the concrete answer to the concrete demands of every day, prevents man from being engulfed by the two extreme dangers: to atrophy in mute unexpressiveness, or to dissolve himself in the innumerable but shapeless potentialities of the infinite.

This solves the great interrogation
 As to our second fatherland.
 For our work here, if it has duration,
 Insures that we eternally shall stand.

Perhaps we can now distinguish more clearly the outline of the new horizons which open before Faust's inner eye at the moment of his death: a milling throng of people following the eternal rhythm of life, childhood, manhood, old age—working, and by working, lifting the concrete, the formed land, out of the chaotic shapelessness of the waters, fighting for it daily so that it will not slip back into the deadly silence of the



answered the call of the hour by an active response—by work. His devotion to work, to purposeful, practical activity, became with him more and more a religious credo, and it is not by chance that he wrote into the album of his grandson, then a little fellow hardly seven years old:

The hour has sixty minutes in store,
 The day a thousand and more.
 Now figure out, my little son,
 All the things that can be done.

Only through work can man become real: only in his work can he recognize himself and become recognizable to others. What Goethe found at the bottom of nature, of art, was a secret creative force which knew only one end: to become visible in an innumerable variety of manifestations. This pattern man had to follow if he was not to miss his real vocation: to become visible, to press and to express all his potentialities in manifest symbols, to crystalize the dark and impalpable whirl of his energies into durable objects which would bear witness of his existence in the light of day. Without this work, man was for him an amorphous mass, something without contours, floundering in a twilight which is the twilight before the creation. A form—and a formless thing was for him a non-existent thing—a form man could find only in the work he did. It fulfilled the function every form has to fulfill: to free and to limit at the same time. To free: because through form alone inner impulses and forces can manifest themselves; and to limit: because form narrows down

unformed. If we asked under which form of government this new world would stand, Goethe would answer with a skeptical smile. The thing that really mattered to him was what he called the communal effort: the daily work of the common people for their common good. He did not believe in political slogans, no matter in which camp they had been formulated; he was highly suspicious of general principles, of grandiose ideas which, in spite of their solemn ring, could only divert man from his sole and primary duty: the demand of the hour. He had no use for missionaries who preached the salvation of man through a magic formula, be it even so bewitching a formula as "liberty, equality, fraternity," because the passionate fight for these principles, for any principles as a matter of fact, allowed man only to play hooky, to run behind the school, to neglect, while searching in the clouds, the concrete tasks with which our daily existence confronts us. "Grand ideas and great conceit," he remarked, "are always geared to bring about fearful misfortune."

We know what he meant by this fearful misfortune: it was the French Revolution whose sight frightened and upset him. When opposing the French Revolution, he did not defend any privileges, and certainly not the many which he himself considered unjust. What he feared was the dissolution of order, of form and shape in the socio-political field, the unleashing of chaotic forces which would burst through the dams and destroy—not only the guilty ones, but the innocent,

plain, hard-working people as well. He anticipated—and he anticipated correctly—the Reign of Terror, the endless chain of Napoleonic Wars, an upheaval which would not only bury under its weight the “old regime” for which he held no particular brief, but which would endanger and obstruct the slow and laborious progress of mankind which was to be achieved only step by step, by a devoted application to the exigencies of each day, and not be running amuck under the spell of abstract ideas, no matter how noble they sounded.

It is quite revealing that in the little well-wishing poem to America there is not even a hint at a new political or social order, at representative government or majority rule or the like. In another document, however, he does make mention of the American form of government, and we cannot help being amused at the perspective in which he views it. In 1819, at the age of seventy, he sent upon request of his New England admirers a set of his collected works to the Harvard library. And this copy he dedicated “to the magnificent country which draws the eyes of the whole world upon herself by a solemnly lawful state of affairs which promotes a growth hampered by no bounds.” Aren’t we startled, looking around us in 1982, to hear our government called a “solemnly lawful state of affairs?” Be that as it may, he approved of it; and not because it rested on a set of political ideas which he may or may not have preferred to others—and to be quite frank, he hardly did—but because it promoted growth, and whatever promoted growth was good in his eyes. Only order, only a concrete visible organization capable of warding off the onslaught of unruly impulses, of chaotic and shapeless elemental forces, can promote growth. What mattered in a new world as he saw it in his vision, was to permit the communal effort to come into play, to see to it that every individual could become real by being allowed to do his work, that everybody could stand firm on his own place, no matter how modest. Then indeed the body politic as a whole could not help being sound and healthy.

The communal effort—that is what counted in his eyes, the common fight against the dangers which threaten the community of men. And this community was for him indivisible and all-embracing. Every barrier which tried to cut up this indivisibility was to him a dangerous and meaningless abstraction. The idea of different nationalities became to him more and more a nebulous superstructure erected over the palpable, concrete life and activities of the individual within the community. The only citizenship he proudly claimed was that of a citizen of the world, and it was in his eighty-first year, at a time when Europe entered a phase of violent nationalism and imperialism, that he made a statement whose benevolent wisdom mankind has not yet learned a hundred and fifty years later: “All in all, it is a strange thing with national hatred. On the lowest level of culture you will always find it most strongly and violently. But there is a level where it dis-

appears entirely, and where the good or bad fortune of one’s fellow-nation is felt as keenly as if it had befallen your own. This level of culture corresponded to my own nature, and I had entrenched myself firmly on this level before I had reached my sixtieth year.”

Better than anybody else Goethe knew—or rather: more painfully than anybody else Goethe had experienced within himself—that it takes a long and laborious training to develop the attitude without which a new world cannot be born, an attitude which succeeds in balancing harmoniously man’s rightful claim to independence and society’s rightful claim to man’s submission. The level must be found where man can save his own face, that individual face which Goethe loved so dearly, and still become a part of a larger whole, a community without whose shelter man destroys himself and his surroundings. It is, indeed, a most timely problem, and Goethe, citizen of a much less shaken world than ours, saw it in all its mercilessness and inevitability. Long before others, he was afraid of the rise of a mass civilization, of an anonymous uniformity in which the individual would lose his unmistakable face, and he knew very well that this danger could arise under any form of government, a democratic no less than an autocratic one. Yet he knew equally well the destructive results of a reckless individualism which would not only destroy all order, but would, at the same time, isolate man, transport him into a frigid loneliness in which the individual himself could not survive. To be sure, he did not care for the masses, this shapeless monster which blurred and gobbled up the distinguishing features of each individual; but he cared even less for those who believed that the only thing that mattered was to release and to realize their unbridled urge for personal freedom.

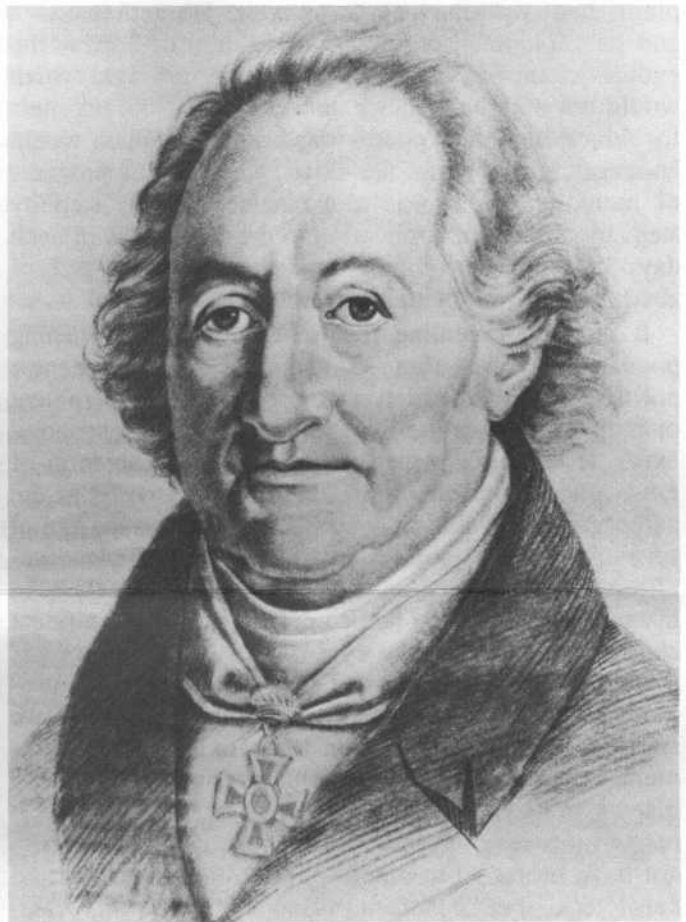
To achieve this balance where man does not abdicate before the demands of society, and where society is not ripped apart by man’s rightful claim to self-realization—that is the task we have to fulfill if we want to bring about a new world. Goethe knew that it would never do to find an easy but superficial compromise between the two conflicting tendencies, a grudging give-and-take where, more often than not, the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing. A basic attitude had to be found, not a composite of two or more, but just one basic attitude which would at the same time comprise self-preservation and self-abandonment. This attitude was to be made the cornerstone upon which the education of a new man for a new world was to rest.

He found it, and in the great novel of his old age, in *Wilhelm Meister, Journeyman*, he describes the school in which the generation of the future is educated for the future. He leads us in this novel into his “pedagogical province,” one of the most inspiring pedagogical utopias ever developed by Western man. But before he introduces us to the concrete curriculum of the school,

he shows us the pupils' training in the basic attitude without which no curriculum and no program would be of any avail. And what is this attitude? Goethe calls it reverence, a reverence extending to three spheres: the reverence for that which is above us, the reverence for that which is around us, and the reverence for that which is underneath us. When speaking of "above, around, and below" he does not only refer to the human and social structure, although in the case of the reverence for that which is underneath us, he takes pains to point specifically to the human level, to those who through suffering, social inequality, lack of strength, are being held in the lower regions. With his "above, around, and below" Goethe wants to draw a much wider circle: he wants to point to all possible directions of the universe. Below: that is the very earth upon which we stand, the solid soil from which we and all nature derive our daily food, the forces under the surface which feed all vegetative life. Around: this is the human level, the sphere of man, man as our neighbor and equal. And above: this is the world of the spirit, of the stars into which our destiny is inscribed, the world of the spirit's Highest: of God. This is what the disciples of the pedagogical province learn as their first and basic lesson: that they owe reverence to the whole cosmos, the suprahuman, the human, and the subhuman.

Reverence, then, appears to Goethe as the basic attitude of a new man in a new world, for it is the human sentiment in which man's insistence on his independence and his recognition of his dependence on other powers are blended. It does not obliterate man's face, for reverence has nothing whatsoever to do with slavish submission, yet it does, at the same time, give proper due to everything which is outside our own ego, be it "above, around, or below." The German word, the German equivalent for reverence which Goethe uses here, seems to define the attitude of which we are speaking much more clearly. The word is *Ehrfurcht*, a compound of two words: *Ehre*, meaning honor, and *Furcht*, meaning fear, or awe. *Ehrfurcht*, then, is the human sentiment which permits man to show awe without losing his honor. This is exactly the way Goethe defines the word: "If man lets himself be governed by *Ehrfurcht*, he can keep his honor while rendering honor." In this sentiment, and in this sentiment alone, pride and modesty have become one and the same; it makes us great and small at the same time; it keeps us aware of the fact that we are faced with powers which determine us, but that we have the right and the duty to face these powers as free men.

Not to be overcome by fear, not to abdicate, not to feel that we are only playthings in the hands of outside forces—could there be a more timely lesson? And do we not remember in this connection a word of an American statesman which, quite unconsciously to be sure, sounds like an echo of Goethe's wisdom even if it is, more likely, the echo of a Thoreau dictum: "The



Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in his later years.

only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Yet this is only half the truth as Goethe saw it. Being wiser than the statesman in question, he would have continued: and the next worst thing we have to fear is absolute fearlessness, the denial of our limitations, the arrogant emancipation from the awe which we owe to the above, the around, and the below. There is a sort of freedom, a rebellious blindness against everything that limits us, which is as disastrous as fear. Fear gives the powers outside ourselves complete control over our own existence, but recklessness makes us lose control over ourselves, transforms us into helpless puppets—not in the hands of others, but in our own hands. And who, in our days, in the days of a perniciously unfettered self-confidence, everybody blithely doing one's own thing, would not have to ponder Goethe's words: "Everything that liberates our mind without giving us control over ourselves is ruinous."

Liberty and control, being free and being bound at the same time—this in Goethe's eyes is the position man has to find. And therefore the disciples of the "pedagogical province," after having acquired the three forms of reverence, have yet to learn the highest type of reverence: reverence for oneself. Not to violate our own honor to which we, as human beings, are entitled, nor, on the other hand, to violate the limitations and conditions of our nature; not to become sub-

ject to the dark and instinctive drives in our soul, nor to hurt and suppress our innate, God-given constitution. This, then, would be wisdom's final fruit: to be true to self, yet never to become a slave of self.

This is Goethe's lesson, the lesson that is taught in the "pedagogical province." And who would deny that this conviction may have a meaning for our own lives and our own days, no matter how much the conditions of Goethe's world and ours may differ? A poet never tries to give answers which will hold good under all circumstances, and certainly no such attempt was made by Goethe who, more fervently than anybody else, believed that every day has its own demands, and that, obviously, the demands of today cannot be met with the answers of yesterday.

Yet he knew equally well that man's basic problems are always the same, and that we cannot do more than re-formulate the principal attitudes so that they will furnish us with a definite answer in a definite situation. "All intelligent thoughts," he said, "have already been thought; what is necessary is only to try to think them again." He tried—and he tried as sincerely and honestly as any man can. Once, when he was a very old man, a Frenchman came to see him, and after looking into this venerable face, furrowed by wisdom and sorrow, exclaimed: "*Violà un homme qui a eu de grand chagrins.*" Goethe liked these words and translated them, somewhat arbitrarily and incorrectly, as you will not fail to notice, by the words: "There is a man who has taken life seriously." Indeed, he had the

right to confess that he never played with life, that he never shut himself against the sufferings, the doubts and arduous tasks which are man's lot. He accepted all of it, beauty and despair, joy and misery.

He knew the dangers, dangers in his own heart, and dangers approaching him from outside, yet he never lost hope that somehow he—and we—would pull through. One of his most beautiful poems he ends with the words: "We bid you hope;" and the old man of eighty stood in his little study, and while his life was drawing to a close, he put into the mouth of his dying Faust the hymn to a new life, to a new world. And this, indeed, Goethe would have wished the coming generations to learn from him: the hope and the faith that man's endeavors are not lost, that the vision of a new world can and must remain alive, even if darkness is closing in on us. He did not want to offer ready-made answers on how to do things tomorrow. But he hoped and wished that his whole life's work, the sum total of his existence, would strengthen future generations in their belief that there will *be* a tomorrow, and that our own daily work will bring it about. His whole existence, not this or that work of his, was to hold out hope for the future. And we cannot do him greater honor than by just repeating the little song of gratitude which he addressed to a fellow-poet, to Schah Sedschaa, an old Persian sage and singer of the thirteenth century:

And fear will sieze us never
While living with your song!
Your life, may it last long,
Your kingdom—ever!

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